



Featured Article

Applying Social Learning Theory to the Observer Role in Simulation

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KEYWORDS

observational learning;
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observer role;
observation worksheet;
Bandura

Abstract: Students are often assigned to the role of observer during simulation experiences. Educators may struggle with the best way to provide learning experiences for students participating in this role. This article describes how one Midwest community college utilizes the component processes of Bandura's observational learning as a foundation to design simulation experiences around the observer role. Utilizing the component processes of attention, retention, motivation, and motor reproduction to design simulation experiences provides all participants, regardless of the role, the same opportunities to achieve scenario learning objectives. Short videos illustrating these concepts are included and examples of activities for each component of observational learning are provided. Recommendations for future research related to the role of observer are shared.

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Students are often assigned to the role of observer during simulation experiences. Simulation design may limit opportunities for learning in this role. This article describes the use of the observational learning construct of social learning theory as the foundation for designing learning experiences for students participating in the observer role.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory focuses on learning that occurs within a social context and how people learn from one another. Bandura (1977) focused his early work on the construct of observational learning in which the learner observes a live or symbolic model then duplicates a process, strategy, task, or skill demonstrated by the model. Bandura

proposed that observational learning involves four component processes: (1) attention, (2) retention, (3) motor reproduction, and (4) motivation.

Attention Processes

Attention processes determine what features of the modeled behaviors the learner will focus on. "People cannot learn much by observing unless they attend to, and perceive accurately the significant features of the modeled behavior" (Bandura, 1977, p. 24). In other words, the learner must have his or her attention directed toward the modeled behaviors in order to learn from them.

Retention Processes

Retention processes help the observer to imprint the observed behaviors to memory in symbolic form.

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Bandura (1977) proposed that learners use mainly imaginal and verbal systems to remember the modeled behaviors. When using imaginal systems, the learner envisions performing the modeled behavior at a later time or in a different situation. Learners use the verbal system when given the

opportunity to discuss what they observed. Verbal discussions also provide opportunities for the observer to compare their judgment with the judgment of others and to distinguish accurate from inaccurate thinking.

Key Points

- The observational learning construct of social learning theory can be used as the foundation for designing learning experiences for students participating in the observer role.
- To promote the application of attention processes to specific modeled behaviors, students in the observer role are provided with a faculty-developed worksheet listing concepts linked to the scenario objectives.
- Regardless of their role, students indicate similar responses related to achievement of scenario objectives and satisfaction with the simulation experience on faculty developed post simulation evaluations.

Motor Reproduction Processes

Bandura (1977) identified four required phases of enactment in order for the modeled behavior to be reproduced: (1) Cognitive organization, (2) initiation, (3) monitoring, and (4) refinement based on feedback. According to Bandura, learners must first cognitively organize constituent elements of the modeled behavior. Once the learner has organized the elements of the modeled behavior, new patterns of behavior can be initiated. Monitoring by other observers and subsequent feedback help to refine and eventually reproduce the desired behavior.

Observations cannot be correctly reproduced without providing opportunities for the learner to implement all four phases of enactment.

Motivation

Bandura (1977) noted that learners are more likely to adopt modeled behaviors if they are motivated by intrinsic or extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation comes from inside an individual rather than from any external source. Extrinsic motivation refers to factors that are external such as the promise of a reward or the threat of punishment.

The Observer Role in Simulation

Students participating in simulation scenarios are often assigned to 2 types of roles: Process-based roles and

response-based roles (Jeffries & Rogers, 2007). Students participating in process-based roles, such as nurse or team leader, have decision-making ability during the scenario and are actively engaged with the simulated patient. Students participating in response-based roles, such as observer, are not actively engaged with the simulated patient. Process-based roles are usually assigned first with remaining learners then assigned to response-based roles. Challenges can exist when students participate in the response-based role of observer. Students may be inactive observers and inattentive to scenario events. Video 1 shows an example of inactive observers viewing from a remote location. Conversely, students may become overactive observers and intervene during the scenario. Video 2 shows an example of a student who becomes an overactive observer during a scenario. In addition to the behavioral challenges that exist when students participate as observers, the perception that response-based roles are less valuable than process-based roles may decrease faculty and student investment in the experience. Harder, Ross, and Paul (2013) conducted an ethnographic study of student perspectives of the roles they were assigned during simulation. Students in the study perceived the role of the observer as passive and most preferred not to be assigned to this role. The authors conclude the article by recommending that instructors should limit the number of students assigned to observer roles.

Challenges aside, there is evidence that participation in the observer role can provide some of the same learning opportunities as participation in process-based roles. Jeffries and Rizzolo (2006) conducted a multisite, multi-method study exploring the use of simulation in nursing education. The authors found that, regardless of the role the student assumed during the simulation, there were no differences among the students in knowledge gained, satisfaction with the experience, or self-confidence. The authors concluded that role assignment does not affect overall student learning outcomes. Ertmer et al. (2010) conducted a cross-case comparison design study comparing critical thinking characteristics of students participating in process-based roles to those of students participating in response-based roles. The researchers discovered that all roles displayed instances of reflection, contextual perspective, and logical reasoning. The authors identified that the response-based role may be more useful in helping the students appreciate the “big picture” view of the scenario. Kaplan, Abraham, and Gary (2012) also compared the learning experience of students participating in the observer role with students participating in the process-based roles. Three weeks after the simulation experience, both groups of students answered 10 test items within a course examination on the topic of the scenario. The researchers found no difference ($p = .97$) in the scores on the 10 test items between students who participated in the process-based role and students who participated as observers.

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